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Preface

A friend once asked me, "If there was a pill you could take that would make you non-Autistic, would you take it?" I'm not going to lie; I thought about it. It would be nice to be able to be in a room of more than five people and not automatically be sensory overloaded. It would be nice not to brace in pain every time a truck passes by my home office. It would be nice to be able to form (and maintain!) connections with more ease. But I told my friend, "No, I wouldn't take that pill." At the end of the day, I love being Autistic, and... it's hard being Autistic. It's hard navigating a world that wasn't built for me.

I love the creativity and interweaving of my mind. I delight in the dopamine I get from spending hours learning about my special interest. My ability to understand complex things and find patterns enlivens me. My ceaseless curiosity makes life a never-ending wonder.

People with a surface-level understanding of autism often reduce autism to "being socially awkward." However, autism is so much more than social-communication differences. Difficulty with allistic (non-Autistic) communication has certainly caused me some pain, but for me, it certainly isn't the hardest part about being Autistic. *For me, the hardest part about being Autistic is my relationship with my body.*

My body is often a place of too-muchness and not-enoughness—sensory overload, fog, discomfort, and body alienation. Alternatively, many Autistic people stay frozen in the space of perpetual too-muchness and are constantly overwhelmed by the world. To be Autistic is to frequently be intruded upon by the world. The smells, tastes, sounds, and demands for chitchat can feel like constant invasions.

This way of living left me feeling unfulfilled and disconnected. After my autism diagnosis at the age of thirty-seven, following the diagnosis of one of my children, I put my psychological training to work to cultivate a more meaningful, grounded, and value-consistent life. I shifted my focus

to working primarily with fellow Autistic adults in my private practice and found connection and support in the online Autistic community. As an Autistic psychologist, I take great pleasure in helping fellow Autistic people develop lives that work for them.

As I became more knowledgeable about my diagnosis, I realized I needed to prioritize self-care. I began to learn how to take care of my body, mind, and spirit in a way that helps me feel grounded, relaxed, and happy. Creating and sharing these education and wellness resources with the neurodivergent community has brought me a sense of purpose and belonging. Thanks to these experiences and learning how to integrate self-care that works for me, I've had less burnout and a deeper connection to others. I hope the ideas in this book help you in your Autistic journey.

You can engage with the ideas in this book in many different ways, depending on your preferences. You might want to skip around to various topics or entries that address needs you have at any given moment, or you can choose to focus on practicing just one exercise for a while. I always advise my clients to be patient with themselves as they learn new things—don't expect perfection immediately (this can be especially difficult for us Autists!). Trying things again and again and learning what works for you and what doesn't is an important part of the process.

What I share in this book has been influenced by my own specific circumstances. I am an Autistic-ADHD individual, which places me in the neurominority category, and I also hold multiple privileged identities, including the ability to speak. While some of this book may have relevance for non-speaking Autistic individuals, I acknowledge that my experience means that this book primarily caters to speaking Autistic individuals without co-occurring intellectual disabilities. In sharing this book from my context, while also holding in mind the complexities of the many intersecting human experiences that I'm aware of, my hope is to provide insights and tools for self-care that resonate with you and that you can apply to your specific context while acknowledging the inherent limits within this text.

Your body is doing amazing things for you every day, and self-care is one way that you can show gratitude and appreciation for all its hard work.

Introduction

Many Autistic people experience life in survival mode, trying to avoid and deflect the too-muchness of the world. When you're Autistic, it's as if your nervous system exists on the outside of your body, fully absorbing every single sensory input, social interaction, and piece of information. Although this heightened sensitivity can be a strength—perhaps making you observant, intelligent, and curious—it can also quickly overwhelm your body and mind. It's like your internal battery is always being used, and so it depletes faster than those of your neurotypical peers. That's why you need unique ways to rest and rejuvenate that coordinate with your body's specific preferences. Self-care can act as a protective buffer from the intensity of the world, enabling you to recharge your battery and live a full and engaged life.

Masking, in particular, can drain your battery even faster. Due to the stigma associated with autism, you might mask or repress your natural ways of self-soothing in order to look less Autistic. For example, your body probably wants to avoid eye contact, stim, and/or move to help you ground and regulate. But if you spend your life masking and suppressing this natural instinct, you might experience more sensory overload and become disconnected from your body.

Whether you mask or not, it's important to learn how to take care of yourself in ways that actually reward and nourish your brain, instead of using self-care ideas that are created from a neurotypical lens.

That's why the tips, ideas, and information in *Self-Care for Autistic People* are tailored specifically to address sensory, emotional, relational, and professional challenges so you can feel more aligned with who you are and build a grounded and expansive life.

Self-Care for Autistic People includes information on how to work with your sensory and nervous systems, find practices to help you self-advocate, and discover ways to limit burnout. Starting a self-care practice may seem

overwhelming, so take your time and focus on the chapters that resonate with you. You can also start by implementing a few practices at a time. Here are just some of the dozens of practices you'll find in this book:

- **Manage Your Sensory Needs**
- **Unwind Tension in Your Muscles**
- **Support Your Gut Health**
- **Put Your Mind to Sleep**
- **Drop Unnecessary Demands**
- **Identify Red Flags and Green Flags in Friendship**

As an Autistic psychologist, I know that fostering a healthy relationship with your autism is key to living a fulfilling life—and self-care can help you do that. You have so much to offer this world, but to do that, you first need to listen to your body, process your emotions, and truly embrace all the wonderful things about yourself. Get ready to build the balanced and joy-filled life you deserve!

CHAPTER ONE

Cultivating Sensory Safety

Self-care is undoubtedly important for everyone. But for Autistic people, it's especially necessary because of the way our bodies interact with the world. Within this chapter, you will explore the significance of self-care for Autistic people and learn how to overcome common obstacles that might hinder your self-care pursuits. This chapter will also go into detail on what is the bedrock of self-care for many Autistic people—sensory self-care. Sensory self-care helps you learn to listen to your body's needs regarding what you see, hear, touch, taste, and smell and then address those needs in a way that works for you.

This chapter prepares you to begin incorporating self-care into your life and establishes the framework for your journey toward holistic well-being. You'll likely find that proactively taking care of yourself feels empowering and enables you to create more situations where you feel calm, focused, and connected.

An Important Note

Self-care is not a one-size-fits-all solution. So much of the self-care conversation seems detached from the complexities of real life—after all, what happens when someone doesn't have access to fresh vegetables to make a green smoothie or when the air quality in their neighborhood is so poor that taking a walk would be harmful? Self-care is intricately woven into the fabric of our intersecting identities, which then interact with the surrounding social structures. While I've tried to select self-care activities that can be adapted to various contexts, some of these entries may feel misaligned with your specific circumstances. Systems of oppression that influence BIPOC, disabled people, genderqueer people, and women also need to be addressed to support human thriving. Since these systemic issues are beyond the scope of this book, the entries will focus on the things within your influence that can help foster resilience as you navigate these systems and as we continue to build a more inclusive and safer world for all.

WHY SELF-CARE IS SO IMPORTANT FOR AUTISTIC PEOPLE

Living in a world that wasn't designed for you can be incredibly exhausting. On a daily basis, you may need to navigate physical, emotional, cognitive, digestive, or other vulnerabilities that many Autistic people experience. Plus, you might find that your specific sensory needs often go unconsidered, your communication and thinking styles are often disregarded, and you are frequently misunderstood. The weight of stigma and negative stereotypes further compounds these daily struggles. On top of that, you have all the "regular" responsibilities and stress that come with being a family member, a romantic partner and/or friend, an employee, and so on.

When you add up all these factors, they can result in you feeling tired, overwhelmed, and/or burned out. You deserve to relax, recharge, and reset your body. That's where *Self-Care for Autistic People* comes in. Taking time to assess how you feel and address your needs is a vital way to restore your energy and tend to your health and overall well-being. Practicing self-care can help you improve your physical health, strengthen your relationships, enjoy more peaceful moments, set boundaries, and achieve goals.

OVERCOMING THE CHALLENGES OF PRACTICING SELF-CARE

Practicing self-care isn't always easy for Autistic people. Two obstacles might stand in your way when it comes to self-care:

1. **Masking**
   Masking can pull you away from your authentic experience and make it challenging to connect with your needs and preferences.
2. **Interoception difficulties**
   Many Autistic people grapple with interoception—the ability to understand your body's internal signals. This further complicates self-care, as you might struggle to accurately gauge your physical and emotional states.

Both of these experiences distance you from your body and its needs—which is the core of self-care.

Self-care starts with self-attunement, which is the practice of tuning into your inner experiences at any given moment. For example, if you're feeling overwhelmed, you might take a step back and ask yourself what specific influence is causing this feeling. What is your body asking for right now? Or, if you're feeling anxious, you may take a pause to notice and name the story your mind is spinning at that moment. For Autistic people, however, the intricacies of masking and the innate challenges with interoception can make self-attunement particularly difficult. Without the ability to assess your internal states, your needs remain obscured, preventing you from addressing them. Complicating matters, you might even dissociate from your body, a protective response stemming from the overwhelming nature of the world around you.

If, like me, you discovered your autism later in life, by the time you realize this about yourself, you may be so disconnected from your body and core needs that you don't even know where to start! This is why, for many Autistic people, self-care starts with rebuilding trust with your body. Your first steps will involve learning to listen to what you need, improving your

communication with your body, working through past traumas, and learning to take your needs (and pleasure) seriously. You might not have previously treated your needs with much importance if you are someone who masks. If this is the case, then prioritizing your self-care is actually a profound step toward unmasking and overall well-being. Your body deserves loving care, and you're the best person to provide it. After all, you know yourself better than anyone, so lean on that expertise to put yourself and your needs first.

WHAT IS SENSORY SELF-CARE?

For most Autistic people, sensory regulation is the fundamental building block of self-care—it's like the foundation of a house. The entire structure will fall apart if the foundation is off. If you lack sensory regulation, all your other systems will be off, and you might experience anxiety, irritability, or meltdowns. You might also struggle to focus when your sensory system goes haywire.

Sensory self-care refers to the intentional practice of managing and meeting your sensory needs. Some common sensory needs include sensory detox, managing sound and smell sensitivity, deep pressure or strong physical sensations, and repetitive movement. When you practice sensory self-care, you'll recognize and respond to these needs in order to create a more balanced and regulated sensory experience. For example, to address the need for deep pressure and sound regulation, you might lie under a weighted blanket with headphones on, listening to your favorite song on repeat. By practicing this type of sensory self-care, you can foster more agency to regulate your emotions, executive functioning, and relationships.

GET TO KNOW YOUR SENSORY PROFILE

While you have more than five senses, there are typically the "big five" that come to mind when we talk about sensory sensitivities: taste, smell, touch, sound, and sight. These five senses have a powerful influence over how you experience any given moment.

The first step in prioritizing sensory self-care is getting to know what bothers you (your triggers) and exactly what your ideal sensory experience

entails (your preferences). Collecting this information may sound simple, but it can be a bit of a complex task for many Autistic people because:

1. You may have paradoxical or conflicting sensory experiences.
2. Many Autistic people struggle with body awareness, so you may have a hard time decoding what your sensory experience even is.

If this task is challenging for you at first, know that you'll get better at it as you practice. Getting clarity about your sensory triggers and preferences in each of these five domains can equip you to accommodate your needs and cultivate an ideal sensory environment. (See the Manage Your Sensory Needs entry in Chapter 2 for more ideas on managing your five traditional senses.)

Identifying Your Sensory Triggers

Sensory triggers are the things that grate on your nervous system and cause sensory overload, such as loud or unexpected noises, bright lights, certain textures, unexpected touches, and strong smells.

If you struggle with body awareness, you may not even know when or why you're feeling sensory overload; you might simply register that you feel bad or have a headache. This is a problem because if you aren't comprehending that your sensory system is overwhelmed, then you won't take steps to regulate yourself! It's as if odorless poison were slowly creeping in and you didn't realize it. Learning to identify your sensory triggers helps you be more proactive in removing yourself from sensory-triggering situations if possible and addressing overload that does arise if not.

Working to identify your specific triggers is sort of like being a detective. For example, the next time you have a headache or a wave of anxiety (note that sensory overload may feel like anxiety), do a quick scan of your body and surroundings: Is there anything bothersome about your environment? Are you under a bright light? Is there a strong smell near you?

Again, you are the expert on yourself, so get curious and use that agency to improve your experiences. Discovering your sensory triggers can take some time and attention, but it's well worth the effort. Here are some ways to begin identifying your triggers:

- **Keep a sensory-trigger journal:** Jot down how you feel throughout the day and what experiences cause discomfort or distress.
- **Conduct a mindful environment scan:** Do a scan of your environment whenever you have a wave of discomfort to see if you can identify potential triggers.
- **Notice muscle tension:** Pay attention when your body is clenching or bracing, and note what is happening around you at that time.
- **Seek professional support:** Consider working with a trained professional, like an occupational therapist, who can guide you through identifying your sensory triggers and developing strategies to manage them.

Knowing your sensory triggers will help you manage your environment and self-advocate for spaces that work for you. For example, when you enter a restaurant, you might say something like, "I have light sensitivities. Is it okay if we sit in that corner rather than under this light?" Taking control of your experiences in this way can empower you and help build self-advocacy confidence—which are also forms of self-care!

Identifying Your Sensory Preferences

Many Autistic people find it easier to identify sensory triggers than sensory preferences. However, sensory preferences are just as important as sensory triggers. Your sensory preferences are what help you feel calm in your surroundings and soothe you when you're upset. Creating a soothing sensory environment helps you focus more effectively, stay grounded, and engage with people around you.

Sensory preferences will vary a great deal from person to person. Someone who is highly sensitive to visual input may enjoy dim lighting in a clean and organized environment with no visual clutter. On the other hand, someone who is a visual seeker may enjoy disco lights, LED lights, spinners, and other visually stimulating elements. There are no right or wrong answers here; you decide what works best for you.

There are a variety of ways to explore your sensory preferences. You can:

- **Cultivate self-awareness:** Take time to reflect on your experiences and how you respond to different sensory stimuli. Notice how certain sounds, textures, smells, tastes, and visual stimuli affect your mood, energy levels, and overall well-being.
- **Keep a sensory journal:** Create a journal where you document your observations and reflections on your sensory experiences.
- **Get feedback:** Ask trusted friends and family members how they think you respond to different environments.
- **Use sensory checklists:** A sensory checklist is a comprehensive list of sensory options, usually categorized by the different senses. You can find several free sensory-preference checklists online (simply search "sensory-preference checklist," or go to my website, NeurodivergentInsights.com, where I have several free sensory checklists).

When you get a handle on what your sensory preferences are, you can make small changes to your surroundings to create a more peaceful, calming environment; be better equipped to advocate for your sensory needs; and know what soothes you when you are upset or experiencing sensory dysregulation. These are all ways of practicing self-care as well!

UNDERSTANDING BALANCE AND MOVEMENT

Sensory self-care goes beyond your five senses and also includes three hidden or invisible sensory systems: proprioception, the vestibular system, and interoception. Let's look at each one in more detail.

Understanding Proprioception

Proprioception refers to your ability to know where your body is in space without consciously thinking about it. Proprioception receptors are located in muscles and joints and provide information about where your body parts are and how much pressure to apply. Proprioceptive "under-responders" crave

proprioceptive input and likely enjoy the experiences of pressure, weight, constrictive clothing, intense movement, and more. Proprioceptive "avoiders" are sensitive to the slightest of touches and may be accused of overreacting when someone brushes up against them. Discovering tolerable methods to incorporate proprioceptive input into your sensory routine, while also advocating for your body's boundaries, is key when you are a proprioceptive avoider.

Understanding Your Vestibular System

Your vestibular system helps you coordinate balance and movement. In your inner ear, there are receptors that not only help you tell how fast you're moving and in which direction but also assist in deciding how fast to move and in what direction. If you're a vestibular system "under-responder," you seek out more movement and vestibular stimulation (things like swinging, rocking, bouncing, and jumping). Over-responders, on the other hand, experience this stimulation to a high degree and experience motion sickness more easily. Things like riding in cars, in elevators, and on escalators and even walking up the stairs can bring on discomfort. If that's your experience, you will benefit from taking movement slow and not intentionally engaging in activities designed to make you dizzy (don't be peer pressured into spinning teacup rides!).

Understanding Interoception

Finally, interoception has to do with accurately perceiving what is happening *inside* your body (like your heartbeat, hunger, and emotions). If you have heightened interoception awareness, you likely feel everything at max volume but may struggle to differentiate what is what (for example, what is anxiety versus hunger). If you have lower interoception awareness, you likely struggle to experience things like thirst, hunger, the urge to use the bathroom, and emotions. If you struggle with interoception, putting your body's basic needs on a schedule is vital because you may not receive the signals when your body needs something.

COPING WITH SENSORY CHALLENGES

Navigating these sensory challenges is an important first step in your self-care practice. The following ideas will give you a general framework for managing your sensory needs so you can begin to think about an even wider range of self-care options. These suggestions will empower you to identify and embrace your needs and celebrate your ability to address them.

Create a Sensory Safety Plan

After you identify your sensory triggers and preferences, you can write a safety plan that captures your key findings. Developing a personalized sensory safety plan can help you anticipate and manage potential triggers. Write down calming strategies, safe spaces, and tools that comfort you. Additionally, brainstorm an exit strategy when you must be in an overwhelming sensory environment. Having this information written down ahead of time will allow you to navigate challenging sensory situations with more ease.

Understand and Cope with Meltdowns

Meltdowns occur when sensory overload becomes too overwhelming and your sensory system, well, melts down. During a meltdown, it may feel like all the sensory signals are screaming at you, as if you have lost control of your body and actions. Meltdowns can be disorienting, anxiety inducing, embarrassing, and exhausting! One of the goals of your self-care practice will be to avoid or minimize the frequency of these high-stress situations by spotting your triggers.

Recognizing the early signs of a meltdown and having a plan in place so that you can quickly implement self-soothing techniques can help you manage and recover from these intense experiences. Additionally, practicing self-care in the aftermath of a meltdown is important, as many Autistic people experience a lot of shame around meltdowns.

Understand and Cope with Shutdowns

Shutdowns are physically similar to meltdowns, but they look like the complete opposite on the outside. A shutdown is when a person has experienced

sensory overload and their body responds by dissociating and shutting down. Shutdowns are tricky because, to the outsider, you likely look calm. During a shutdown, your body is taking in the sensory stress and freezing it—but the situation is still very stressful. It's very important to realize that your body is in a state of stress and your body needs to complete the stress cycle and release the stress when it is safe to do so. The ideas throughout this book will help you release this pent-up stress energy and return to sensory safety.

Embrace Your Sensory Needs

One of the most effective things you can do to address sensory challenges is to accept and love yourself just as you are. Simply embracing your sensory needs is a crucial and powerful act of self-care. This involves:

- Getting curious about your sensory experience.
- Acknowledging and accepting your sensory preferences.
- Adjusting to your surroundings to create a sensory-friendly environment.

You are always worthy of love and care; recognizing and tending to your sensory needs is one way that you can show your body and mind that affection.

INCORPORATING OTHER TYPES OF SELF-CARE

Sensory self-care is the bedrock upon which other self-care practices are built—you'll want to keep practicing these skills even as you explore other important types of self-care. In fact, you'll find that you frequently refer back to your sensory needs in each of the other categories covered in this book:

- **Physical self-care:** This category includes anything that helps you care for your body. For example, you can learn to build good sleep habits and explore strategies to work with your sensitive nervous system so you feel more regulated and grounded in your body.

- **Emotional self-care:** This category involves activities aimed at developing emotional awareness and resilience. For instance, you can expand your emotional awareness and literacy, enabling you to better identify and process your emotions.
- **Mental self-care:** Mental self-care includes practices that support your mental health and wellness. This can include things like identifying and aligning with your values, which can bring a sense of clarity and purpose to your life, and embracing mindfulness, which strengthens your ability to attune to yourself in any given moment.
- **Social self-care:** Social self-care encompasses techniques that assist you in navigating social situations with care. Learning how to establish and nurture meaningful relationships, as well as understanding and embracing Autistic communication patterns, can pave the way for more genuine and valuable connections.
- **Professional self-care:** This topic covers how to nurture your professional self and thrive in your workplace. For example, you can find a helpful mentor and seek accommodations for enhanced workplace comfort.

Autistic people often face barriers, stigmas, and difficulties in each of these areas, making intentional self-care practices that much more important. As you read the ideas in this book, you will find ways to recharge your battery, cultivate resilience, and connect with your authentic self. When you take care of yourself, you'll embrace and appreciate your true identity and more fully engage with the world. Let *Self-Care for Autistic People* be your guide as you walk this path toward strength, harmony, and joy.

CHAPTER TWO

Physical Self-Care

Have you ever thought, "I wish I could be a mind in a jar"? Many Autistic people share this sentiment because having a body is just so much work! If you struggle with the more embodied aspects of being human, that can impact your physical self-care.

Complicating matters, when you don't feel good in your body, some of the more challenging parts of being Autistic become heightened. For example, your need for routine can be intensified when your body feels unwell. And interacting with others can go from manageable to unbearable! Physical discomfort hampers executive functioning, making planning, organizing, and carrying out daily tasks more difficult.

There are valid reasons why physical self-care can be challenging for Autistic people. Sensory issues can make physical self-care overwhelming. Low body awareness can create difficulties, and executive functioning struggles make it harder to initiate and maintain consistent self-care routines. Regardless of this complex relationship with your body, you *are* capable of caring for your body, one action at a time.

In this chapter, you will find activities designed to help you discover what types of physical self-care work best for you. You might want to enjoy movement, reset your nervous system, prioritize healthy sleep habits, or explore exercises that enhance body awareness. The activities in this chapter are broken down into categories—Movement and Regulation, Sleep, and Body Care and Hygiene—so you can easily find ideas that will help your body thrive. To avoid feeling overwhelmed, try to implement just one or two activities that resonate with you and be gentle with yourself as you incorporate new self-care into your life.

Manage Your Sensory Needs

Movement and Regulation

Navigating the sensory landscape as an Autistic person presents unique challenges. That's because around 90 percent of Autistic people grapple with sensory-processing differences and can experience either sensory hypersensitivity or hyposensitivity. Sensory hypersensitivity may lead to avoidant behaviors, like evading bright lights or loud sounds, while hyposensitivity results in dulled perceptions. Some Autistic people are also sensory seekers, meaning that they pursue dynamic visuals or crunchy textures.

Understanding and managing your senses is a form of self-care that allows you to be observant of what works for you, then empower yourself to shape your sensory experiences accordingly. Let's explore how to manage the five core senses.

TASTE: Balancing Preferences and Sensitivities

Autistic people often have distinct taste preferences and sensitivities. Here are some common situations and ideas for handling them:

- If you find comfort in a select group of "safe foods," especially during stressful times or transitions, embrace that habit as a form of self-care. Eating these safe foods can provide stability when your sensory world feels overwhelming.
- If you're a sensory seeker in the taste realm, try spicy and crunchy foods to excite your taste buds.
- If you are hyposensitive to taste, be aware of potential risks, like not recognizing spoiled food. To ensure freshness, regularly check expiration dates and consider implementing a color-coded or visual system in your fridge, especially if you frequently consume leftovers.

SMELL: Creating a Soothing Olfactory Environment

Your sense of smell can be a double-edged sword, as it can either overwhelm you or provide a source of joy. If you're sensitive to smells, try eliminating toxins and chemicals from your living space to reduce discomfort and minimize migraine triggers. If you live with others, feel free to mention how smells affect you and see if everyone is on board with sensory-friendly options. On the other hand, sensory-seeking individuals might relish scented products.

If you are a hyposensitive smeller, being aware of potential dulled sensitivity to smells is essential for safety as you will have more difficulty identifying toxins in the air. Consider installing specialized air-quality detectors or alarms in your living space, which can provide an extra layer of safety by alerting you to any harmful substances in the environment.

TOUCH: Navigating Preferences and Comfort

Clothing choices can greatly impact your sensory experience. Whether you prefer constriction or a loose fit, opt for sensory-friendly clothing that you find comfortable. Depending on your preference, either style can act as a buffer against sensory overload.

SIGHT: Embracing Visual Comfort

Visual stimuli can be both captivating and overwhelming. You can create a peaceful sanctuary by identifying visual inputs that soothe your senses and incorporating them into your environment. If you need to manage visual overload, try reducing visual clutter, using sunglasses, or dimming lights.

SOUND: Striking a Harmonious Auditory Balance

Sound sensitivities can disrupt your equilibrium. Make a list of sounds that bring you comfort so you can refer to it when you need to be soothed. Consider using tools like noise-canceling headphones or sound machines to regulate your auditory experiences.

Understand Your Body's Responses to Stress

Movement and Regulation

Do you feel stressed by things that seem minor to others? Do you notice your heart racing and a feeling of panic when too much information comes at you? Do you ever feel overcome with a wave of fatigue or feel like life isn't real, almost as if you were in a dream? These are all signs that your body is flipping into a stressed state. While everyone feels stressed at one time or another, these experiences happen more often for Autistic people. Our nervous systems tend to be less flexible than others', which means we become stressed more easily. Because of your more sensitive nervous system, you likely spend more time in stressed body states, such as fight-or-flight or shutdown mode. Learning to nurture your nervous system is a big part of caring for your body.

When your nervous system is stressed, it goes one of two places—it either revs up and goes into fight-or-flight mode, mobilizing you for action, or it goes into a protective shutdown to reduce incoming sensory input (in other words, it sort of immobilizes you, a state known as freeze). While stress is typically associated with revving up, Autistic people appear to be more prone than the average person to respond to stress by going into shutdown mode. This means you may be experiencing stress, but it's not registering (to you or the people around you!).

When you learn to track and map your nervous system's response, you can better address your body's needs from moment to moment. Here's a rundown of what you might experience in each stressed state, and how to then provide your body with the care and support it needs.

Fight-or-Flight State

This state can feel like a surge of energy, or intense emotions. Examples include feeling restless, agitated, anxious, and overwhelmed. During the fight-or-flight response, engaging in activities that release excess energy or promote relaxation helps complete the stress cycle. You could try some vigorous exercise, deep breathing, or progressive muscle relaxation (see the Unwind Tension in Your Muscles entry in this chapter for detailed instructions) or find a safe outlet for emotional expression.

Freeze or Fawn State

In this state, you might feel emotionally numb, fatigued, disconnected, or dissociated. It can lead you to feeling immobilized or stuck or overly compliant in social situations. In freeze-fawn mode, you are likely to seek to appease others and have difficulty setting boundaries or asserting yourself. In this context, appeasing others is a way that you might unconsciously protect yourself from threat.

When experiencing freeze-fawn mode, your body benefits from gentle and soothing activities to help regulate the nervous system, such as taking a warm bath, gently swaying, or practicing grounding techniques, like focusing on a specific sensory input (for example, you can hold a cup of tea and concentrate on the warmth emanating from it, or you can apply a heating pad to your body and focus on the sensation of heat spreading).

Stimulate Your Vagus Nerve for Stress Relief

Movement and Regulation

Many Autistic people have what I call a "rigid" nervous system, which means our nervous systems don't adapt as easily to incoming stressors and we more easily flip into stressed states (think fight-or-flight and freeze-fawn). This is measured through something called vagal tone, which is associated with the vagus nerve.

The vagus nerve, also called the "wandering nerve" because it interweaves throughout your major organs, influences your heart rate, breathing, and more. It is the core nerve responsible for relaxation. Having a high vagal tone allows you to adapt flexibly to your environment and handle incoming stressors without flipping into a stressed state.

Autistic people often have low vagal tone—meaning you might struggle to adapt to incoming stressors. This all happens on an automatic level. So when your nervous system has a response, it's not because you're weak; it's an involuntary response, much like a sneeze or cough. The good news is that you can improve your vagal tone.

One way to strengthen the vagus nerve is by activating the muscles connected to your vocal cords. Activities like chanting, humming, gargling, and singing use these muscles, stimulating the vagus nerve. These practices help trigger your relaxation response while simultaneously increasing your vagal tone. Try out a few different methods and take note of how you feel. You can build time into your day to chant, hum, gargle, or sing, or simply do them when you're feeling overwhelmed to help reduce stress.

Find Pleasurable Movement

Movement and Regulation

Movement does wonders for your body and mind. It improves heart health, boosts your mood, reduces stress and anxiety, helps your brain operate more smoothly, releases endorphins (the "happy" hormone), and promotes better sleep, among other benefits.

Some Autistic people struggle to prioritize movement, perhaps because coordination and balance may not come easily. This can make traditional exercise routines feel intimidating and overwhelming. Furthermore, traditional exercise opportunities, like in gyms or on organized sports teams, can be sensory nightmares, and it's easy to feel anxious about knowing the social norms of new places.

You might, therefore, find it more helpful to prioritize *pleasurable movement* over traditional forms of exercise. By discovering movements you genuinely enjoy, you can create a soothing and gratifying experience that you are likelier to stick with.

Many Autistic people find repetitive movements like swimming, Rollerblading, skating, running, and walking to be particularly soothing. Pairing such an activity with a stim song can be especially rewarding! You can even think outside the box and try stim dancing or a repetitive circuit-training routine.

Whether it's swimming, dancing, walking, or any other activity that resonates with you, make it a priority to figure out what types of movements make you feel good. These activities provide a sense of rhythm and flow that can calm your nervous system while also providing health benefits.

Use Breathwork to Relax

Movement and Regulation

Breathwork can be an incredibly useful tool for helping you reset your nervous system. This self-care practice provides a way to interrupt the stress cycle and help your nervous system return to a nonstressed state. It seems simple, but it's really powerful—by intentionally connecting with your breath, you can gently guide your nervous system back to a state of balance.

Breathwork is a practice that involves conscious control and manipulation of your breathing patterns. It is based on the understanding that your breath is intricately connected to your nervous system, so by altering your breathing, you can influence your nervous system's state, which in turn influences your emotions. This ancient practice, simple yet profound, empowers you to cultivate a sense of inner calm by activating your body's built-in relaxation response. Something as simple as taking a deep breath activates the vagus nerve, which helps you relax!

You may initially find breathwork challenging due to difficulties with body awareness or coordination. However, with patience, adaptation, and visual techniques, it can become an invaluable nervous system reset tool.

To try out breathwork:

- Find a comfortable space where you can focus on your breath. You may choose to lie down or sit comfortably.
- Allow your body to settle, and bring your attention to the natural flow of your breath.
- Intentionally slow down your breathing pattern, with a particular focus on lengthening your exhale.

- Notice the gentle rise and fall of your abdomen (pay attention to whether or not your stomach rises and falls or if just your chest does, as many people initially struggle to get the breath all the way into their diaphragm).
- If you're struggling to get the breath into your belly, place your hand on your stomach, or if lying down, you can place a small stuffie or book on your stomach. Try to get your hand (or the object) to rise and fall with the breath. This visual feedback is helpful when first learning.
- You can also count as a way to make the practice more concrete.

To use counted breathwork:

1. Inhale through your nose slowly while you slowly count to four.
2. Hold your breath for one second
3. Slowly exhale through your mouth while you count to six (slowing down the exhale is particularly helpful for activating the vagus nerve).
4. Hold for one second, then repeat.

These breathwork activities can help reduce anxiety, improve sleep, improve vagal tone, enhance focus and attention, and increase overall well-being. It's pretty amazing that you can do all that by simply manipulating your breathing patterns! If you're just starting out, be gentle with yourself. Like any skill, it may take time to develop, especially if you struggle with body awareness. Trust your intuition and feel free to modify and adapt breathwork to best suit you.

Unwind Tension in Your Muscles

Movement and Regulation

In the hustle and bustle of daily life, tension builds up in your muscles, leading to physical discomfort and added stress on your nervous system. Progressive muscle relaxation (also known as "tense and release") is a powerful self-care practice that can help you release this tension and activate your body's natural relaxation response.

Progressive muscle relaxation is rooted in the understanding that when your muscles are relaxed, your mind relaxes too. You can cultivate this sense of deep calm by systematically tensing and releasing different muscle groups. Relaxing your muscles activates the parasympathetic nervous system (which then activates your built-in relaxation response). This process shifts you from feeling agitated to feeling calm.

To engage in progressive muscle relaxation:

- Take a few deep breaths, allowing your body and mind to settle.
- Clench and tense the muscles in your feet for 3–5 seconds.
- Focus your attention on the sensation of tension in those muscles. Once you have experienced the tension, release it completely, allowing the muscles to relax and soften.
- Pay special attention to the contrasting sensations of tension and relaxation. Notice the sensation as the muscles let go of their tightness.
- Next, move onto your calves, then continue upward to each major muscle group. Tense for 3–5 seconds and release. Continue this process of tensing and relaxing different muscle groups throughout your body, working your way up to your head.
- Breathe deeply as you release tension, allowing your exhalation to carry away any residual tension. Visualize the tension melting away from your body with each release.

Research has shown that regular practice of progressive muscle relaxation offers numerous benefits. It can reduce muscle tension, decrease physical discomfort, improve sleep quality, decrease anxiety and stress levels, and enhance overall relaxation and well-being. By incorporating progressive muscle relaxation into your self-care practice, you empower yourself to unwind tension, foster a greater mind-body connection, and support your body's natural ability to regulate and find balance.

Progressive muscle relaxation has added benefits for people with sensory sensitivities or difficulties with body awareness. As you consciously focus on each muscle group and the sensations within, you strengthen your body awareness and deepen your connection to your physical self.

Like most things, progressive muscle relaxation is a skill that requires a bit of practice! Consider exploring guided progressive muscle relaxation audios or videos to have a framework the first few times you do it. By incorporating progressive muscle relaxation into your self-care routine, you unlock a powerful tool for unwinding tension while nurturing your nervous system.

Support Your Gut Health

Movement and Regulation

In recent years, researchers have learned a lot about the connection between the gut and the brain. The condition of your gut plays a pivotal role in influencing not only your mental health but also your overall physical well-being. Poor gut health can contribute to inflammation and trouble with cognitive functioning. Autistic people are more susceptible to experiencing gut-related issues, so here are some practices that can support your gut health:

Mindful Eating

- Pay attention to what you eat and how it makes you feel.
- Consider incorporating gut-friendly elements like probiotics and fiber-rich foods into your diet, but be mindful of conditions like leaky gut or small intestinal bacterial overgrowth (SIBO) when incorporating probiotic-rich foods.

Hydration

- Stay hydrated by drinking an adequate amount of water throughout the day. Proper hydration supports digestion and overall gut function.

Stress Management

- Stress takes a toll on your gut! Explore stress-reducing techniques such as deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, and engaging in activities that bring you joy and relaxation.

Reducing Alcohol Use

- Alcohol can have negative impacts on your gut. Consider eliminating or reducing alcohol to improve gut health.

Working with a Holistic Provider

- Working with a functional medicine provider, naturopath, or holistic provider who understands "All the Things" (a term describing the interconnectedness of health systems and vulnerabilities, as coined by Dr. Mel Houser, an Autistic physician) and autism can help you create a personalized plan to support your gut health.

Supporting your gut health is such a vital part of your holistic well-being.

Use Visualizations for Sensory Soothing

Movement and Regulation

Visualizations allow you to immerse yourself in pleasant, imagined places so you can melt into moments of safety, comfort, connection, sensory pleasure, and tranquility. By harnessing the power of your imagination, you can create a sacred sensory space that calms your nervous system and provides a sensory haven. Sensory visualizations are a powerful self-care practice because they offer a respite anytime and anywhere amid life's demands. Plus, they are yet another powerful relaxation exercise to help regulate your nervous system.

Here's how to try it:

- Find a physical space that's as free of distractions as possible. Then close your eyes and think of a location that holds personal significance for you—this could be a treasured memory from a past visit, an image that has resonated with you, or a setting depicted in a beloved book or movie.
- Once you have the place in mind, go through each of your five primary senses, imagining what you would experience:
    1. Start by **visualizing** what you would see in this place. Take in the colors, shapes, and scenery surrounding you.
    2. Next, focus on the **scents** that would fill the air. Breathe in deeply and imagine the fragrances that waft through this space.
    3. Move on to the sense of **taste**. Imagine the subtle flavors that linger in the air or foods you might encounter in this environment, such as the sweetness of a gentle breeze or a comforting beverage.

4. Shift your attention to **touch**. Bring to mind textures and sensations you would encounter. Feel the softness of a blanket against your skin or the coolness of water on your fingertips. Allow these tactile sensations to deepen your sense of connection to the place.
5. Finally, focus on the **sounds** that surround you. Tune into the ambient or natural background sounds filling this space.

- Be present with each layer of sensory experience, savoring the sensations that arise. There is no right or wrong way to experience a sensory visualization. Allow your imagination to guide you, and embrace the sensory details that resonate with you.

Incorporating sensory visualizations into your self-care or sleep routine can provide moments of respite, rejuvenation, and connection to sacred spaces. Cultivating this safe sensory space in your mind creates a soothing experience, allowing you to unwind and find relief from any overwhelming feelings you face.

Note: Some Autistic people have aphantasia, which means they are unable to visualize images in their minds. If you experience aphantasia, focus on engaging with other sensory elements you are experiencing around you right now, like taste, touch, and sound. By directing your attention to these sensory experiences, you can create a meaningful sensory soothing practice that aligns with your perception of the world.

Create a Healthy Sleep Routine

Sleep

Autistic people face a host of sleep issues, such as difficulties falling asleep, insomnia, reduced REM sleep, sleep apnea, narcolepsy, and more. The reasons behind these challenges are myriad—from genetic mutations affecting melatonin regulation and circadian rhythms (sleep-wake cycles) to sensory sensitivities and busy minds.

If you aren't getting quality sleep, you're more prone to depression, anxiety, executive functioning struggles, and many physical ailments. That's why prioritizing your sleep is a very important part of your self-care program. Two ways to do that are by establishing a healthy sleep routine and setting up a sleep-friendly environment.

A bedtime routine provides consistent cues to your brain and body that it's time to sleep. These reminders are especially important for people who struggle to perceive internal cues of sleepiness. Whether it's due to a flattened melatonin curve, where the natural sleep-wake signals may not be as distinct, or challenges with body awareness, you may not readily recognize when your body is tired. Luckily, you can compensate for this by creating external cues that signal to your mind and body that it's time to sleep.

In addition, you can set up your space to maximize sleep. Your brain constantly looks to create shortcuts; one way it does this is by creating associations. For instance, if you always eat chips while watching your favorite show, your brain starts associating chips with the show. In the same way, if you experience sleep difficulties, your brain may start associating the bedroom with stress and restlessness, perpetuating the insomnia cycle. However, by instead consciously creating *positive* associations with sleep, you can rewire your brain and break free from negative sleep associations.

Here's how to improve your sleep routine and environment:

- Aim for consistency: Strive to go to bed at the same time each night. Consistency reinforces the association between the routine and sleep and strengthens your circadian clock.
- Set the stage for sleep: Remove distractions and clutter and decorate with what makes you feel cozy and tired, like soft colors and comfortable bedding.
- Create sleep associations with the bed: Reserve your bed exclusively for sleep (and sex)—try to avoid using it for work or other activities.
- Set your bed apart if needed: For Autistic people, bedrooms often serve as safe spaces to seek refuge. However, frequent retreats to your bedroom can interfere with your brain's associations between the bedroom and sleep. Consider setting up a barrier between your bed and other portions of the room (for example, with a folding room divider or curtain).
- Create a sleep-friendly environment: Consider factors such as temperature, lighting, and noise levels.
- Limit your use of electronic devices for at least an hour before bedtime: The blue light emitted by screens can interfere with melatonin production and disrupt sleep patterns.
- Instead, choose calming activities: Select soothing and relaxing activities that help you unwind and prepare for sleep, such as reading a book, engaging in gentle stretching, or practicing relaxation techniques, such as slow breathing, visualizations, and progressive muscle relaxation.
- Leverage sensory associations: Start using sensory cues, such as smelling a particular essential oil or playing soothing music before bed, to signal to your brain that it's time to sleep.

By creating associations like these, you can reshape your brain's neural pathways, minimize insomnia, and promote healthier sleep patterns.

Put Your Mind to Sleep

Sleep

Autistic people often have busy minds, making it incredibly challenging to fall asleep. You might find yourself consumed by anxious rumination, persistent worry, or a relentless flow of thoughts and ideas. One of the most helpful strategies I've learned for redirecting a busy mind is something called cognitive shuffling.

Cognitive shuffling is the process of intentionally scrambling your thoughts to the point where they no longer follow a logical sequence. It's a technique that can distract and redirect your mind, and it also mimics the cognitive activity typically experienced during the initial stages of sleep. Cognitive shuffling disrupts the evaluative part of your mind and stops it from doing things like planning, problem-solving, and ruminating—thought cycles that tend to keep you awake! By engaging in this exercise, you can break free from the cycle of overthinking and create a mental space that ultimately aids the transition to peaceful slumber.

Some apps, such as MySleepButton, will walk you through a cognitive shuffling exercise.

Try cognitive shuffling independently by following these instructions:

1. Choose a word to begin with, such as "rain," "ocean," or "forest."
2. Start with the first letter of the chosen word; in the case of "rain," you'd start with "r." Think of another word that starts with that letter, like "river." If possible, create a mental image of a flowing river. If you have aphantasia and cannot visualize, simply recall the word without visualization. Now think of another word that begins with the letter "r," such as "rhinoceros" or "rabbit," and bring it to mind. Keep going until you have exhausted all the words starting with "r."
3. Move on to the following letter in the original word, in this case "a." Repeat the process by thinking of words that begin with "a" and visualizing related mental images.
4. Continue this practice, progressing through each letter of the original word, gradually allowing yourself to drift off into sleep. Should any stressful thoughts arise and capture your attention, simply acknowledge them, and gently guide your focus back to the letter you were most recently contemplating.

Give cognitive shuffling a try and see if you can effectively divert your mind's attention, therefore creating a mental state conducive to falling asleep.

Create a Sensory Sleep Haven

Sleep

Another factor often influencing Autistic sleep is sensory issues! The world around you can easily disrupt your slumber, whether it's unwelcome noises from the neighborhood, the struggle to find comfort, or being particular about temperature and airflow.

You might hesitate to invest in sleep supports that could address some of these issues (like high-quality sheets or an eye mask) because they feel extravagant. But try switching the narrative and thinking of them as helpful accommodations for your sensory needs—and forms of self-care too!

When you take charge of your environment, it can help you feel a sense of empowerment and agency, since you are addressing your own needs. It's not about extravagance; it's about recognizing and taking ownership of your life.

Here are some practical sensory items that can accommodate common sleep issues for Autistic people:

- **Eye mask or blackout curtains:** Drown out intrusive light by enveloping yourself in darkness with a top-notch eye mask or blackout curtains.
- **Sound machine or earplugs:** If you find yourself sensitive to sounds, consider a sound machine or reliable earplugs to block out noise. If earplugs are uncomfortable for you, consider using a Bluetooth sleeping headband.
- **High-quality bedding:** Sleep is a tactile affair, and your bedding plays a crucial role. Seek out pillows and mattresses that cater to your sensory preferences. Explore materials, textures, and weights that soothe you. Note that this may change seasonally; for example, you might prefer a more breathable weighted blanket in summer and a softer and warmer weighted blanket during winter.

- **Fan:** Consider investing in a fan for natural cooling and increased air circulation if you find comfort in gentle breezes.
- **Separate beds or bedrooms:** This topic can spark debate, but it's essential to conduct your own analysis of the potential benefits and drawbacks. Many marriage/partnership guides emphasize the importance of sleeping together, suggesting that sleeping separately may signal trouble. However, my personal experience has shown otherwise. For example, when I am not disturbed by my partner's snoring throughout the night, and when they are not affected by my ADHD bedroom mess and late-night shenanigans, we get along much better. Opting to sleep separately doesn't automatically indicate relationship issues; it can simply mean recognizing that quality sleep leads to increased patience and harmony in the relationship.

Experiment, explore, and fine-tune your sleep haven until it becomes a cherished space befitting your sensory preferences!

Embrace Adaptive Self-Care Practices

Body Care and Hygiene

As Autistic people, our relationship with our bodies can be complex, and it is often reflected in our approach to self-care. For this reason, we often benefit from building accommodations tailored to our challenges. Let's explore some key factors that can impact our body-related self-care.

- **Body awareness:** Interoception refers to how your body communicates with your mind. Interoception struggles make it difficult to recognize bodily sensations such as thirst, hunger, and the need to use the bathroom.
- **Executive functioning and demands:** Body maintenance is an ongoing process that requires consistent effort. From trimming nails to prepping food, these tasks can present additional stress for people with executive functioning challenges.

While these create additional barriers, they are also things you can accommodate if need be! By building accommodations that address these specific challenges, you can improve your self-care. Here's how:

Interoception Adaptations

- **Create a visual schedule:** Creating visual reminders to provide visual cues for tasks like using the bathroom, drinking water, and eating is a great way to keep them front of mind.
- **Set timers:** Utilize alarms and timers as reminders to check in with yourself, eat regular meals, drink fluids, and use the bathroom. Since your body may not always register thirst and hunger cues, external cues become essential in ensuring proper nutrition and hydration. You can set these up on your phone if you prefer that method.

- **Try setting goals:** Consider setting goals to address interoception challenges. For example, invest in a 32-ounce water bottle and set a goal to empty it by the end of the day. (This goal serves as a concrete reminder to prioritize hydration, which compensates for the fact you may not be receiving internal signals of thirst.)

Executive Functioning Adaptations

- **Visual reminders and checklists:** Create reminders and checklists for daily self-care tasks. Or use apps like Tiimo to visualize this process.
- **Simplified routines:** Break down self-care routines into smaller, manageable steps. Use visual or written prompts to guide each step of the routine. Simplify choices by organizing food options or health care products in a way that reduces decision-making overload.

You deserve a self-care routine that respects your interoception and executive functioning needs. Embrace accommodations that nurture your well-being!

Take Care of Personal Hygiene

Body Care and Hygiene

Personal hygiene does not always come easy to Autistic people. Due to heightened sensory sensitivities, daily hygiene practices like bathing, brushing teeth, and grooming can feel overwhelming. When it comes to personal hygiene, it's crucial to approach it with a sensory-friendly lens. Understanding the sensory triggers that make certain tasks uncomfortable allows you to brainstorm adaptations and find alternative solutions.

This simple equation can help you break down the process:

Identify Specific Sensory Triggers

\+ Brainstorm Personalized Adaptations

= Effective Self-Care

Begin by identifying the sensory triggers that create discomfort. These triggers can vary from person to person and may include sensitivities to touch, smells, sounds, or other sensory inputs. Once you have identified your sensory triggers, the next step is to brainstorm personalized adaptations. This involves exploring different strategies, products, or modifications that can help reduce your sensory discomfort and make the experience more tolerable.

Here are some examples of swaps and adaptations you can consider to accommodate sensory needs:

- **Oral care accommodations:** Explore alternative toothbrushes with softer bristles and experiment with different flavors of toothpaste. If toothbrushing is challenging, consider using a silicone chewing tool or a vibrating toothbrush for added sensory input. Consider a toothpaste pump if getting toothpaste on your hands or dyspraxia is an issue.

- **Sensory-friendly bathing:** Create a sensory-friendly bathing experience by using soft or textured towels and using a portable heater to heat the room (to minimize temperature transitions). If having water on your face makes showering challenging, consider using a shower cap to block some water from getting on your face. Dry shampoo can be a convenient alternative to washing your hair with water.
- **Scent sensitivity:** If the smells of deodorant, soaps, and/or shampoos trigger headaches or nausea, explore chemical-free, toxin-free, or unscented alternatives. Various body care options that prioritize sensitivity and offer scent-free or hypoallergenic formulations are available. Many people with scent sensitivities do better once they switch to more natural, chemical-free options.
- **Hand-washing sensory challenges:** If the sensations of traditional soap or hand sanitizers are bothersome, experiment with different textures and consistencies. Foaming soaps may offer a more tolerable experience. Additionally, exploring alternatives such as hand-sanitizing wipes or gels with soothing ingredients can provide a sensory-friendly option.
- **Skin-care sensitivities:** Many Autistic people get rashes with popular lotions and skin-care products. Explore gentle and fragrance-free options specifically designed for sensitive skin. Look for products with minimal ingredients and consider patch testing new products on a small area of skin before incorporating them into your routine.

These examples are starting points—everyone's sensory experiences and preferences vary, so do what feels right to you. You deserve a hygiene routine that honors your sensory needs!

Tune Into Your Body's Signals with a Body Scan

Body Care and Hygiene

One way to care for your physical self is by strengthening your connection to your body (this is also known as interoception awareness). Even if you currently struggle with interoception, it is like a muscle in that the more you practice using it, the stronger you'll get! When you improve your body awareness, you are better able to manage your body's needs and respond to your emotions.

One exercise that promotes increased body awareness is the body scan.

Here's how to conduct a body scan:

1. Find a comfortable space where you can focus without distractions.
2. Begin by focusing on your toes and assessing how they feel. Avoid judging or evaluating these sensations; instead, use neutral descriptions like "tingling," "tight," or "relaxed."
3. Gradually scan upward to your head, paying attention to any sensations in each body part.
4. As you progress with body scan practice, you can begin linking bodily sensations to your emotions. For example, when you feel angry, you might notice that your shoulders are tense.

Remember, you are looking to notice and identify bodily signals without attaching meaning to them. The goal of the body scan is not to judge or change the sensations you are experiencing, but simply to cultivate a non-judgmental and curious attitude toward your body.

If sensations are difficult for you to describe, try using other descriptors like color (e.g., "it feels purple"). You may discover your own unique language for expressing bodily sensations, so don't hesitate to get creative and find the language that resonates with you!

Integrate Body Awareness Into Daily Activities

Body Care and Hygiene

While you can build body awareness through direct activities, like body scans, some people might find them too intrusive or challenging (especially if you have a history of trauma). Or, for others, adding another exercise to your daily routine might not sound feasible. If you fall into those categories, you can instead incorporate interoception builders into your daily routines.

Interoception exercises can be boiled down to this simple equation:

Create a Sensation + Notice It

The first step is to create a sensation—you can do this by creating tension, such as squeezing your muscles or pressing your hands together. Alternatively, you can generate a sensation by touching something soft, cool, hot, or bumpy. The second step, "notice," simply involves directing your attention to the sensation, ideally without judgment or evaluation.

Here are two ways to incorporate interoception into your routine:

1. **Integrate interoceptive builders into activities:** Think about your daily rituals and identify ones where you could reflect for a moment while you do them. For example, as you drink your morning tea or coffee, take a moment to feel the warmth of the cup in your hands.
2. **Set alarms as reminders:** Set two alarms throughout the day. When each alarm goes off, do a thirty-second interoception check-in. Focus your attention on a specific bodily sensation, such as the feeling of your feet on the ground or the rhythm of your breath.

By incorporating these activities into your day, you can build interoception awareness without adding an overwhelming task to your to-do list!

Manage Food Challenges: Executive Function and Sensory Tips

Body Care and Hygiene

Nutrition is a complex topic for Autistic people, as it involves navigating numerous obstacles. These challenges may range from sensory challenges to executive functioning difficulties to gastrointestinal issues and co-occurring conditions like Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder (ARFID). In this entry, we'll focus on executive functioning and sensory barriers tips.

Executive Functioning Accommodations

Common executive functioning challenges in this area include challenges with planning, organization, and time management. We might have trouble laying out the steps for making a meal, getting all the ingredients and tools organized, guessing how long each task will take, and juggling multiple tasks at once. Here are some accommodations to consider:

- **Stock up on preprepared or frozen meals:** Keep a supply of preprepared or frozen meals on hand for those low-energy days when you don't feel like cooking.
- **Explore meal-subscription services:** If budget allows, explore meal-subscription services or subscription boxes for convenient, pre-prepared meals and ingredients, reducing executive functioning demands.
- **Break down meal planning:** Simplify meal planning by dividing it into steps: select recipes, create a shopping list, and set a cooking schedule. Visual planners or meal-planning apps can help streamline the process further.
- **Create a routine:** Establishing a consistent meal routine such as "Taco Tuesdays" can reduce decision fatigue.

- **Utilize visual supports for recipes:** When cooking, look for recipes with step-by-step pictorial instructions. Visual instructions tend to work well for Autistic brains because they provide a clear visual road map of each cooking step.

Sensory Accommodations

Sensory barriers can also get in the way of meal prep and eating. Here are a few sensory tips to consider:

- **Safe Foods:** First off, it's good to know what your "safe foods" are—those go-to foods you can eat even when sensory overload hits. Make sure you keep them stocked up!
- **Sensory Environment:** Eating can be quite a sensory experience. So, when you're trying new foods or working on broadening your nutritional horizons, choose a low-anxiety, sensory-friendly environment. A bustling family meal or a noisy cafeteria are not the best places to test your sensory boundaries!
- **Nutrient-Dense Formats:** Do some experimentation and try to find nutrient-dense formats that you enjoy (or can tolerate). For example, smoothies are a structure I can tolerate, so I work hard to pack my nutrition there. One of my kids loves smoothie bowls with crunchy toppings like granola and coconut. Others might lean into nutrient-dense baked goods like muffins. Once you've found a format that clicks with you, focus on expanding your nutrition there, all while keeping your trusty, safe foods on standby when you need them. Having one nutrient-dense source you can tolerate can ease the pressure elsewhere, allowing you to revert to your safe foods as needed while ensuring your body is getting some of those key nutrients it deserves!

Using tips like these to identify your particular executive functioning or sensory barriers and build accommodations around them can reduce stress while nurturing your body.

Supplement with Vitamins

Body Care and Hygiene

Due to sensory sensitivities and food allergies, many Autistic people have narrow diets. There is no problem with seeking comfort through predictable foods and meals. However, it can create some challenges for your gut health and overall nutrient consumption. In fact, research indicates that Autistic people often experience deficiencies in certain minerals and nutrients. Addressing these nutritional gaps is another way to support your physical self-care.

While you should talk to your medical providers, because individual needs vary, here are some nutrients that research suggests may be lower in Autistic people:

- Vitamin D: Essential for mood regulation, bone health, immune function, muscle strength, cognitive health, and heart health, vitamin D may also play a role in cancer prevention.
- Omega-3 fatty acids: These essential fatty acids are crucial for brain health and function.
- Magnesium: Magnesium is involved in various bodily functions, including muscle relaxation, nerve function, and sleep regulation.
- Zinc: Zinc is essential to immune function, cognition, and sensory regulation.
- B vitamins: Several B vitamins, such as folate (vitamin B_9) and vitamin B_{12}, may be lower (or we may have more difficulty absorbing). These vitamins are essential for energy production and neurological function.

You can help ensure your body receives these and other essential nutrients by seeking out nutrient-dense foods and/or supplementing your dietary intake with high-quality vitamins. Again, work with your medical providers—a primary care provider, nutritionist, and/or naturopath—to figure out a personalized plan you can follow.